

## Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**24 November 2022 at 5.45pm**

**In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Fenton (Chair).  
Councillors Akhtar (Vice- Chair), Ashman, Bhullar,  
Fisher, Jalil, Lewis and Webb.

**Also present:** Councillor Padda (Cabinet Member for Housing).  
Delroy Thomas and Susan Smith (Tenant and  
Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).  
Alice Davey (Director – Borough Economy), Ben  
Percival (Assistant Director – Borough Economy), Nigel  
Collumbell (Service Manager – Housing), Jonathan  
Rawlins (Business Manager – Housing and Asset  
Management), Tom Hogan (Neighbourhood Services  
Manager), Marianne Munro (Community Partnerships  
Officer), Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services  
Officer), John Swann (Democratic Services Officer).

### **44/22 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Kaur,  
Shaeen and Ms Brown (Co- Opted Member and Chair of  
Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

### **45/22 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

Councillors Akhtar, Bhullar and Fisher declared an other  
interest in the matter referred to at Minute No. 47/22; Draft  
Housing Strategy 2023- 2028, in that they were landlords.

Councillors Ashman and Fenton declared an other interest in the matter referred to at Minute No. 50/22; Charging principles and concessions for the Local Authority Trading Company and Sandwell Aquatics Centre, in that they were members of Sandwell Leisure Trust.

#### **46/22 Urgent Additional Items of Business**

The board received an update from Councillor Jalil in relation to the UK Building Regulations and Fire Safety Conference and Exhibition 2022.

#### **47/22 Draft Housing Strategy 2023- 2028**

The Board received a report and overview on the **Draft Housing Strategy 2023- 2028**.

The Service Manager for Housing outlined that the document encapsulated a long-term vision to address housing needs in Sandwell; taking into account the findings of the Housing Needs Assessment (See Minute No. 30/22, 30 September 2022).

Refreshed priorities outlined within the report included:

- Best use of Housing Stock across the borough.
- Increase of the supply of affordable housing through regeneration schemes, council housing developments and wider housing partnerships.
- Ensure homes positively contribute to health, wellbeing, independence and quality of life outcomes.
- Raising standards in all rented housing.
- Housing stock strives to achieve net zero carbon.

The Board acknowledged that the Directorate of Housing had already actioned a review of Aids and Adaptions within Council Housing Stock and accepted that under-occupation of properties was a current strategic area of focus.

The Draft Housing Strategy was due to go out to public consultation before being considered by Cabinet in March 2023.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- Value for money was paramount and a procurement exercise for providing adaptations could prove cost effective.
- Ongoing quality control of the Council Stock was crucial to prevent mould and other issues being exacerbated.
- Mobile homes were not currently being considered to house residents.
- Case Officers periodically reviewed temporary accommodation in lieu of a Service Level Agreement (SLA). It was reported that the majority of complaints about temporary accommodation related to location.
- SLAs between the Council and temporary accommodation providers could benefit temporarily housed residents and improve standards.
- Standardised response times for complaints could streamline services and improve repair wait times.
- There had been an increase in individuals presenting as homeless, both locally and nationwide.
- The temporary accommodation site at Holly Grange had been opened and the Manifoldia Grange site was being re- purposed as temporary accommodation; once this site was also operational dependency on hotels for temporary accommodation was expected to decrease, creating budgetary savings for the Council.
- Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) provided affordable housing for single people, however a high density of HMOs in one location was not desirable.
- Regeneration of West Bromwich town centre was likely to deliver a mixture of accommodation.
- Access to recycling facilities in flats had been identified as an issue; a pilot scheme in conjunction with the Directorate of Borough Economy was being developed to better enable residents of these properties to recycle.
- Neighbourhood development could benefit from cross-directorate working, particularly the licensing and planning departments working collaboratively to assist policy formation.

**Resolved that:-**

- (1) that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board supports the implementation of Service Level agreements (SLAs) between the Council and temporary accommodation providers.
- (2) that the Director of Housing explores the feasibility of a standardised response time for complaints.
- (3) that the Directors of Housing, Borough Economy, and Regeneration and Growth work in collaboration to shape policy around neighbourhood development.
- (4) that the Director of Housing considers the above as part of any formulation of housing strategy and policy.

(Councillor Jalil left the meeting during consideration of this item)

**48/22**

### **Asset Management and Investment Programme for Housing 2023- 2024**

The Board received a report and verbal update related to the **Asset Management and Investment Programme for Housing 2023- 2024**, due to appear before Cabinet in December 2022.

The programme detailed maintenance works required to sustain a high quality of Council housing stock; as well as to be compliant with landlord standards. This programme would also incorporate a review of insulation levels throughout the properties to assess any opportunities to improve the energy efficiency quality.

This programme sets out the contracts to be awarded in the municipal year of 2023- 2024 to facilitate these planned maintenance works. In addition, the Service Manager for Housing, set out plans for the refurbishment plans for St Giles and Moorlands courts in Rowley Regis.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- Inflationary uplifts were incorporated into all contracts and reviewed every 3- 5 years.
- Contracts within the programme had termination provisions within them, with a window of six months for the Council to complete a re-procurement exercise.
- Elected members might benefit from training specifically on procurement exercises and local authority contracts.
- Most repairs were defined by the nature of the repair, however for tenants with increased vulnerabilities additional considerations were applied. For example, what would normally be considered a 'day-to-day' repair could be re-classified as an emergency repair for a disabled tenant with mobility issues.
- Tenants might benefit from a review of the repairs triage process with consideration of household characteristics applied.
- The £2.4m identified for 'day-to-day' repairs supplemented the existing services provided by the in-house team.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Director of Law and Governance arranges training related to procurement exercises and local authority contracts to be offered to all councillors.
- (2) the Director of Housing reviews the robustness of the repairs triage process by the service with consideration for household and resident characteristics.

**49/22**

**Report of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group – Housing Hub Review.**

The Board received the **Housing Hub Review**, the first report of the **Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group**. The group had scrutinised the customer experience of accessing the Housing Service with the telephone via mystery shopping exercises, staff interviews and a desktop review.

The purpose of the review was to address increasing demand post-pandemic for access to Housing Services via the telephone with the goals of:-

- Reducing waiting times and abandonment rates.
- Increase First Contact Resolution

The Service Manager for Housing summarised the review for the board, and Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group members set out the following identified recommendations:

- One published number only for all housing enquiries.
- The introduction of customer satisfaction surveys.
- Review of the translation needs and service offer.
- Improvements to the Housing Hub Performance Management Framework with a focus on high- quality customer service.

In addition, representatives from the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group outlined reports would continue to be produced holding the Council to account, and that priorities included reports being authored in language accessible to tenants. The Chair of the board thanked members of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group for their hard work.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- The call waiting times did fluctuate but overall were too long and must be reduced., Recruitment was ongoing to provide adequate staff to help improve this.
- The costs associated with being on hold for extended periods of time disproportionately impacted those tenants on pay-as-you-go telephone plans.
- Customer Satisfaction surveys were to be automated, freeing up staff to assist with customer queries.
- Opening times of the Housing Hub (9am-1pm) may not be convenient for all tenants.
- A pilot of face-to-face housing surgeries had started in November, however the number of visitors was far below pre-pandemic levels.
- Ongoing updates on levels of customer satisfaction may provide the Board with useful information and enable them to seek assurances around service provision.

- That the Service manager for Housing accepted the recommendations of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group.

Members agreed that the Housing Hub Review would benefit from ongoing scrutiny so the implementation of recommendations could be monitored.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Director of Housing investigates means to reduce the cost of telephone calls to the Housing Hub, including the viability of a call-back service.
- (2) that the customer satisfaction levels of tenants receiving a service from the Housing Hub be monitored by the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.
- (3) that the Housing Hub Review – Implementation of Recommendations Update be brought to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

**50/22**

**Charging Principles and Concessions for the Local Authority Trading Company (LATC) and Sandwell Aquatics Centre**

The Assistant Director of Borough Economy outlined that the Board's views on **Charging Principles and Concessions for the Local Authority Trading Company and Sandwell Aquatics Centre** were being sought.

The following principles that would be used to inform a subsequent charging policy were:

- Commercial approach to competitive price setting to seek to optimise trading income by attracting a mass market.
- Concessionary pricing for targeted groups including those in receipt of universal credit, military veterans, children in care, disabled individuals and carers.
- Core prices for key products, with a level of discretion to leisure centre to respond to market conditions.

The Board heard that preparations for the transition of facilities to the newly established LATC and the opening of the Sandwell Aquatic Centre to the public were underway. The Assistant Director for Borough Economy also outlined proposals that Sandwell Aquatic Centre would be a separate product, to recognise the scale and quality of the facilities.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- The board of the LATC was to be determined in the new year.
- That the Sandwell Aquatics Centre should not be prioritised to the detriment of existing facilities.
- Concerns were raised over the two-tier system and that local residents may be priced out of using the Sandwell Aquatic Centre facilities.
- Sandwell Aquatic Centre was the only Olympic-sized swimming pool in the West Midlands and that it needed to generate revenue to future proof the facilities.
- The Sandwell Aquatic Centre replaced the Langley and Smethwick leisure centres, consensus was reached by the Board that users transferring from these facilities should be able to do so at no additional cost. It was agreed that proposals for users transferring from these sites to the Sandwell Aquatic Centre as part of the One Card offer would be explored.

Members agreed that the Charging Principles and Concessions would be brought back to Scrutiny in due course, with greater detail around concessionary pricing and viability of pricing structure so members would have further information to better inform decision making.

**Resolved That the Charging Principles and Concessions for the Local Authority Trading Company (LATC) and Sandwell Aquatics Centre Update be brought back to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.**



**51/22**

## **Update from the Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group**

The Board received an **update from Members of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group**. The Board heard that since the formation of the Group in December 2021 members of the Group have accumulated £14,000 of time, at a cost per hour of £13.70 based on the Power to Change report 2019.

Members of the Group had attended two national tenant conferences and have contributed to scrutiny, report authoring and Reviews. In October members of the Group instigated joint scrutiny and tenant auditors meetings with the view to collaborate where needed.

The Board heard that an area of particular focus was building safety, particularly with regards to fire safety in high rise blocks.

The Chair of the Board thanked members of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group for their hard work and endeavours.

**52/22**

## **Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Board noted its Work Programme for 2022/23 and received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Further to Minute Nos. 49/22 and 50/22 (above), it was noted that the **Housing Hub Review – Implementation of Recommendations Update** and **Charging Principles and Concessions for the Local Authority Trading Company (LATC) and Sandwell Aquatics Centre Update** will be added to the Board's Work Programme.

Meeting ended at 8.16pm

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# Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

10 January 2023 at 5.45pm

In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

**Present:** Councillor Fenton (Chair);  
Councillors Akhtar (Vice- Chair), Ashman, Fisher, Jalil,  
Kaur, Lewis and Shaeen.

**Also present:** Councillor Padda (Cabinet Member for Housing).  
Simon Smith (Associate Director – Savills).  
Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing), Neale Cooper  
(Finance Business Partner – HRA, housing and  
Assets), Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services  
Officer), John Swann (Democratic Services Officer).

## 1/23 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors  
Bhullar, Webb and Ms Brown (Co-Opted Member and Chair  
of Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

## 2/23 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

## 3/23 Minutes

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 1  
November 2022 be confirmed as a correct record. 4/23

### Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to  
consider.

## Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan

Further to Minute No. 40/22 (1 November 2022), the Board received the **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 30 Year Business Plan**.

The Associate Director of Savills delivered a presentation to the Board and outlined that the HRA Business Plan set out the strategic plan for managing the Council's housing stock. The Council's HRA owned over 28,200 properties for rent, the freehold on over 1,252 leasehold flats and other buildings across the borough.

The HRA was a ring-fenced income (from rents and service charges) and expenditure account for council housing and sits separate to the Council's other budgets. Expenditure related to operational costs, maintenance, debt costs, major refurbishments and new build developments through its capital programme. The Council has had a self-financing model since 2012, this led to the Council adopting additional debt (approximately £25m) to 'buy' its housing stock from the Government, however it allowed greater autonomy from central government with better long-term financial planning.

The Council had not produced a 30 Year Business Plan before and the Plan had been authored to ensure the sustainability of the HRA. The Board was advised that it was a draft document and would be amended in future years to address factors including:

- The results of the 14,000 stock condition surveys due to be procured.
- The new Decent Homes Standard is expected shortly, with new Housing requirements due to be introduced.
- The cost of compliance with new building legislation including the Building safety Act 2022
- Improving energy efficiency; the Council's climate change strategy had identified that the cost of retrofitting Council housing stock was an estimated £600m, with external funding needed to achieve this.

Benchmarking exercises had been conducted with demographically similar local authorities and both the operating margin and reserve levels were comparable. Sandwell's repairs expenditure was higher than others,

however the Council management costs (£906 per unit – 2020/ 2021 average) were an average of £300 lower than other comparable local authorities.

Following assessments and desktop exercises, the following risks had been identified:

- Government Rent Policy had capped increases by 7%, with costs in the sector up by 11.5% on average.
- Energy efficiency challenges, over 50% of housing stock met EPC C standards across the borough.
- Properties lost via the right to buy scheme were expected to increase due to discount rates for tenants under that scheme to go up by 10.1% next year.
- Changing regulatory demands and associated cost pressures.

The existing development programme, due to be completed for 2026/ 2027 was due to provide 475 homes, at a cost of £109.6m and funded by borrowing, grants from homes England and right to buy receipts. However, it was expected that a greater number of properties would be lost via the right to buy scheme during this period resulting in an overall loss of council housing stock. Three scenarios had been modelled for additional new builds, based on an average cost of £250,000 per property.

The HRA debt stood at £484.886m, having been financed by specific loans (£337m) with a balance of 'internal finance' from the general fund. In addition, new borrowing for investment in the existing stock was via separate fixed rate loan at 4.25%.

The Director of Housing summarised the business plan by outlining that the HRA was in a relatively viable position but required ongoing borrowing. This was required on an annual basis to cover the increase of HRA debts; the prudential budgetary limit had been approved by the Council's Section 151 financial officer in conjunction with the Council's overall limits.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- That Zero Carbon technology including heat pumps was expected to become cheaper as usage became more widespread.
- The result of the stock condition surveys would better inform the costs associated with achieving zero carbon.
- That the Council had a dedicated damp and mould team and has self-referred to the Housing Regulator. The Board heard that the Council had 52 cases of Category One hazardous mould, and tenants with medical or lung conditions may need support to ventilate their homes or be re-housed.
- Approximately 60 households per week were requesting repairs related to mould.
- For every property sold via the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme, RTB receipts provided only approximately 30% of the cost of building a new home.
- Income from RTB receipts, if not spent within a 5- year period, had to be returned to central government, however this money could be spent on acquiring existing properties as well as building new ones.
- Council-owned business premises not in use could potentially be converted into housing stock to address the housing shortage.
- Availability of land was the biggest barrier to providing new builds in Sandwell, challenges included sites acquired by developers which were not built upon (commonly known as land banking).
- Repair requests were triaged and assessed by need and could be escalated if required.
- The Board discussed the three modelled New Build Scenarios to achieve greater property construction than contained within the baseline plan. The Board found that due to current financial conditions nationally, it would be prudent to allow the market and interest rates to stabilise before recommending an option to Cabinet.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Directors of Housing and Regeneration and Growth investigate the feasibility of turning Council owned non-residential properties into residential units.

**6/23**

**Update from the Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group**

The Board deferred the update until the next Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board meeting.

**7/23**

**Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Board noted its Work Programme for 2022/23 and received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Meeting ended at 7.37pm

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